VOTIVE PRACTICES
الممارسات النذرية



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Votivgaben
Offrandes et objets votives

The ancient Egyptian practice of dedicating small objects to deities as a means of establishing a lasting, personal relationship between deity and donor is well known. The dedication of votive objects in sacred areas such as temples, shrines, and cemeteries was an optional practice for which there is sporadic archaeological evidence. Large deposits of Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom votive offerings have been recovered from numerous sites throughout Egypt. There is no clear Middle Kingdom evidence that people were allowed to dedicate votive offerings in state-run temples, but the practice seems to have remained part of popular religion and is most visible in funerary contexts. During the New Kingdom, it became permissible for individuals to set up stelae or leave small votive objects in the outer areas of state temples or in special shrines. Most of the small votive offerings were made to Hathor, or related goddesses. In the Late and Ptolemaic Periods many stelae, ritual objects, and figures of deities were dedicated in sacred areas, often in relation to animal cults. The majority of votive objects seem to have been made in temple workshops for cult purposes. Most of the offerings fall into three main categories: representations of deities, objects used in the temple cult, or objects associated with human fertility. Both women and men dedicated votive objects to reinforce prayers or to perpetuate their involvement in a divine cult. It is rarely possible to be certain exactly why a particular object was offered or where it was originally displayed. Old votive objects remained sacred and were buried or dumped within temple precincts.

من التقاليد المصرية القديمة المعروفة تقليد إهداء القرابين للآلهة كطريقة لتكوين علاقة شخصية ما بين الإله وبين من أهدى له القربان وتوجد دلالات متقطعة عبر التاريخ المصري لإهداء القرابين النذرية بالأماكن المقدسة مثل المعابد، المقاصير، والجبانات وهذه العادة كانت إختيارية لكل شخص وليس مجبر عليها أحد. عثر على ودائع كبيرة للقرابين النذرية من العصر العتيق ومن الدولة القديمة بمواقع مختلفة ولكن لايوجد أدلة من الدولة الوسطى تشير إلى أن عامة الشعب كان مصرح لهم بإهداء القرابين النذرية بالمعابد الحكومية ومع ذلك إستمرت العادة كجزء من التدين الشخصي وتظهر خاصه في السياق الجنائزي. أما في الدولة الحديثة فكان مسموح للأشخاص العاديين بوضع لوحات نذرية او ترك قرابين نذرية صغيرة بالأماكن ا لخارجية للمعابد أو بمقصورات مخصصة. وغالبية القرابين الصغيرة كانت مهداه للإلهة حتحور أو آلهات متصلة بها. كانت القرابين النذرية مثل اللوحات وتماثيل الآلهة بالعصري المتأخر والبطلمي مهداه بمناطق مقدسة غالباً ما تكون متعلقة بالطوائف الحيوانية. على ما يبدو أن غالبية القرابين النذرية كانت مصنوعة بورش عمل بالمعابد للأغراض الطائفية. تقع معظم القرابين النذرية تحت ثلاثة تصنيفات:

فمنها قطع تمثل آلهة، أو أدوات تستخدم في طقوس المعبد، أو أشياء متعلقة بالخصوبة الآدمية. نادراً ما يستطاع تحديد سبب إهداء تلك القرابين أو تحديد موقعها الأصلي ولكن بالتأكيد أهداها النساء والرجال للتأكيد على دعائهم أو لضمان إستمرارية مشاركتهم بطائفة أو بأخري. لم تفقد القرابين قدسيتها بعد مرور الزمن، فقد كانت تدفن أو تلقى داخل حدود المعبد.



When Egyptians visited a shrine or temple they prayed and made sacrifices to the resident deities. An optional practice was the dedication of votive objects. While the term "votive," which derives from the Latin *votum*, meaning "promise," is frequently employed with reference to Egyptian religious practice, such personal gifts to the gods seem to have been made in anticipation of blessings or in order to appease a deity, rather than in fulfillment of a vow after a prayer had been answered. No Egyptian religious text states that it was necessary for private individuals to give such objects to deities, yet there is sporadic archaeological evidence for the practice of depositing votive offerings in sacred places.

Votive Offerings: The Archaeological Evidence

The custom of placing small objects in shrines seems to have been one of the oldest Egyptian religious practices, dating back to an era when local temples were probably accessible to all. Deposits of Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom votive offerings have been found in temple areas at Elephantine (Dreyer 1986; Kemp 2006: 116 - 121), Abydos (Kemp 2006: 124 - 126), Hierakonpolis (ibid.: 121 - 124), and Tell Ibrahim Awad in the northeastern Delta (Eigner 2003; Kemp 2006: 126 - 128), as well as at a sacred hillside site at northwest Saqqara (Yoshimura et al. 2005), and an administrative-cultic center at Tell el-Farkha (Ciałowicz 2006). Throughout the third millennium BCE the most common types of offering were human or animal figurines, miniature vessels, plaques, and amulets.

Some object types, such as child figurines or model baboons (fig. 1), occur at most sites. Others, such as the "hedgehog plaques" at Elephantine (Dreyer 1986: pls. 37 - 38), or the scorpion figurines at Hierakonpolis (fig. 2; Kemp 2006: 123, fig. 40.4), are prominent only at a particular site, suggesting diverse local traditions. Barry Kemp has noted that the early votive offerings often bear no relation to the iconography of the main deity of the temple area in which they were found. He proposes that the offerings reflect traditional (local) beliefs, which were independent of the state religion (Kemp 2006: 111 - 128).



Figure 1. Early Dynastic faience baboon figurine. Hierakonpolis (?). UC11004.

During the third millennium BCE, regional shrines and temples gradually lost their autonomy and access became restricted to a state-appointed priesthood. A new theology emerged in which all offerings were officially made by the king. That no substantial deposits of votive offerings have been recovered from



Figure 2. Early Dynastic faience scorpion figurine. Hierakonpolis (?). UC11000.

within Middle Kingdom state-run temples is likely due to this shift, though patterns of preservation and/or investigation may also be a factor. The religious life of private individuals at this time may have centered on domestic shrines and funerary cults. Some votive offerings, such as female figurines, seem to have been left in the outer areas of non-royal tombs (Pinch 1993: 218), and the tomb of Isi, the nomarch of Edfu, and the *ka*-chapel of Heqaib, the governor of Elephantine, became long-lived cult centers in their own right (Kemp 1995). Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period fertility figurines (nude female figurines), amulets, and plaques have also been excavated in the vicinity of a simple Hathor-shrine set up at the mining site of Gebel Zeit on the Red Sea coast (Castel et al. 1984-). This shows that the dedication of votive offerings to deities was still a popular practice in shrines that were outside the Nile Valley, if not the state system (Bloxam 2006).

From the Second Intermediate Period onwards, it became acceptable for ordinary people to represent themselves worshiping divine images on votive stelae set up in sacred areas. Long pilgrimages were not a requirement of Egyptian religion, but there is plentiful New Kingdom evidence for people visiting local temples and cemeteries. Some deities, including Amun-Ra, Hathor, Thoth, and Ptah, acquired prayer-related epithets such as "the one who hears petitions."



Figure 3. Late 18th Dynasty faience ear plaque with ears depicted in registers. Amarna. UC722.



Figure 4. New Kingdom (?) wooden votive ear. Unprovenanced. UC55155.

Accordingly, model ears—and stelae, plaques, and other objects showing ears—were dedicated to these deities (figs. 3 and 4;

Morgan 2004; Sadek 1987: 245 - 267). The purpose of these votive ears was probably to encourage the deity to listen to and grant the donor's prayer (Pinch 1993: 250 - 253).

Royal cemeteries were also sites of votive activity during the New Kingdom. For example, the Great Sphinx at Giza became the focus of a popular cult, and votive stelae and small objects such as model hawks, lions, and ears were dedicated in mud-brick shrines there (Hassan 1953: 32 - 50). In addition, votive ostraca were deposited in and around royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings by workmen engaged in the area (Keller 1995). Access to state-run temples was still limited to a priestly elite but some temples provided facilities for ordinary worshipers. "Intermediary statues" of priests and officials bear inscriptions promising to pass on prayers to the deity within the temple in return for libations or food offerings (Baines 1991: 182 - 183; Pinch 1993: 333 - 336, 347, pl. 40).

Huge quantities of small votive objects, mainly made from faience, have been found in or near New Kingdom Hathor-shrines at sites such Deir el-Bahri, Faras in Nubia, and Serabit el-Khadim in Sinai (fig. 5; Pinch 1993). It seems that Hathor, and related goddesses, were thought to be particularly approachable deities, at least when they were pacified with gifts. The presence of typical votive objects, such as Hathor masks, Bes amulets, and fertility figurines, in some 18th Dynasty temple foundation deposits, shows that such offerings were regarded as an official part of the temple's function (Pinch 1993: 79, 329). The use of royal names on many small faience objects suggests that they were produced in state-run workshops and stresses the reigning king's role in making such offerings available.

At some sites small votive offerings were dedicated throughout the New Kingdom, while at others the practice does not seem to have been resumed after a hiatus in the Amarna Period. In the later New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period, other types of votive practices arose, such as writing prayers on temple walls or columns (Sadek 1987: 52 - 58), or carving "votive footprints" into temple pavements and roof blocks, presumably to keep the donor perpetually standing in the presence of the deity (Jacquet-Gordon 2003: 5; Yoyotte 1960: 59 - 60).

The custom of making votive offerings flourished again in the Late and Ptolemaic Periods, when costly bronze statuettes and ritual objects were dedicated in sacred places by named individuals. Our best evidence for this practice comes from the caches of bronze statuary and other ritual equipment excavated from temple sites. Many such bronzes have been found in the sacred animal necropolis at Saqqara, some still wrapped in linen (Davies 2007: and see figs. 76 - 78; Sadek 1987: 270 - 276). In situ votive bronzes have also been excavated from the temple of Osiris-*iw* at Ain Manawir in Kharga Oasis (Wuttmann et al. 2007). The statuettes are normally of deities (fig. 6) or sacred animals. The figure itself, or its base, may incorporate a written petition to a deity, and animal statues may contain all or part of a mummified sacred animal (Davies 2007; Smith 1974: 54).



Figure 5. New Kingdom faience fragment of a model naos sistrum with Hathor head design. Unprovenanced. UC35807.



Figure 6. Late or Ptolemaic Period bronze figure of Osiris. Unprovenanced. UC30483.

Terracotta figurines of nude women and ithyphallic men, as well as figurines of Bes, Isis, and Harpocrates (Horus the Child), have been found in shrines of the Ptolemaic Period at Saqqara and Athribis (Myśliwiec 2000: 202 - 208, figs. 58 - 60). The Roman Period saw an increase in the importance of domestic cults, when terracotta figures of deities, which might once have been dedicated in temples, were instead kept mainly in household shrines.

Types of Votive Object

With the exception of some of the jewelry and amulets found in small local shrines, votive offerings seem to have been made specifically for cult, rather than personal, use. Before the Late Period, it does not appear that people felt compelled to offer gifts that were intrinsically valuable (however, for a discussion of early votive objects exhibiting a high level of artistic skill see Kemp 1995: 45). The symbolic value of an offering such as a pottery cow must have been considered more important than the cost of its materials. Offerings such as strings of faience beads were probably made by people of all ranks simply for the sake of tradition (Pinch 1993: 354 - 355). However, objects such as stone votive stelae, or the painted votive textiles found at Deir el-Bahri (ibid.: 103 - 134), would have been costly to commission.

The majority of surviving votive offerings fall into at least one of three main categories:

1. Representations of deities or divine powers/qualities. A miniature divine image is the most characteristic of Egyptian votive objects. The divine images that feature on votive stelae, ostraca, textiles, and plaques can most often be interpreted as manifestations of deities in sacred animals or as manifestations of deities depicted as cult statues—that is, depictions of the statue of the deity rather than the deity itself. The donor of the object may be shown praying or sacrificing to this manifestation. The animal forms of deities, so frequently represented on votive objects, may have been considered more accessible than human or semi-human forms, and thus more appropriate for use on private objects (Pinch 1993: 349). Figurines of animals such as baboons, who were later associated with particular deities, are among the earliest known types of votive object (fig. 1; Dreyer 1986: pls. 24 - 31). The votive bronzes portray a wide range of divine beings, not just the deity in whose precinct they were dedicated. Fierce, protective manifestations of deities (sphinxes, lions, and desert cats, for example) are favored among votive objects (Pinch 1993: 184 - 197). The divine powers of "hearing prayers" and "watching over people" are celebrated in offerings that show multiple ears and eyes (fig. 3).

2. Cult objects. Many of the vessels found in sacred areas seem to have been brought by temple visitors for use in their sacrifices to the gods (Pinch 1993: 321 - 322). The fact that the vessels were left behind was probably to ensure the visitors' continued participation in the daily ritual of the temple. Full-size objects, such as Late and Ptolemaic Period bronze *situlae* (ceremonial water carriers) (fig. 7), some with votive inscriptions (Green 1987: 66 - 103), could have been used temporarily by temple personnel before being added to

votive deposits. Many other offerings are miniature representations, models, or cheaper versions of objects used in temple rituals or traditionally offered to cult statues. Examples include the model sistra (ritual rattles) (fig. 5), and plaques showing sistra, found in various Hathor shrines (Pinch 1993: 143 - 146, pls. 29 - 31), and miniature bronze offering trays from Saqqara (Green 1987: 116 - 120, figs. 128 - 132). The spiritual benefits may have been thought to be the same whether the offering was a functional object or a model.

3. Objects associated with human fertility. From the Early Dynastic Period through the Roman Period, Egyptian votive material included offerings such as images of children, nude female figurines, with or without children, and models of the male or female genitals (Pinch 1993: 197 - 245, pls. 46 - 52). Many of these objects do not conform to the standard conventions of Egyptian art and appear to belong to the sphere of folk religion (Kemp 2006: 111 - 128). The desire to conceive and raise children seems to have been the main motive for depositing such objects in sacred places. Their sexual explicitness was probably thought to enhance their effectiveness. The dwarf and hippopotamus deities who traditionally protected pregnant women and young children also feature among the votive offerings of many periods (Pinch 1993: 290 - 295). Hathor's associations with love, sex, and birth may help to explain why she was the recipient of so many votive offerings.

The Dedication of Votive Offerings

Both women and men dedicated votive objects (Pinch 1993: 342 - 345). Many temple visits probably took place during particular religious festivals, when temples made special provision for votive practices (Sadek 1987: 167 - 198). Private letters mention people visiting temples at times of personal crisis (Baines 1991: 196; 2001). Some votive objects were probably used to reinforce specific prayers for help; others may have been dedicated on important personal occasions such as marriage, but there is rarely direct



Figure 7. Late or Ptolemaic Period bronze situla with incised decoration. Unprovenanced. UC30657.

evidence for this. At most periods, votive inscriptions are formulaic rather than personal. They tend to use vague phrases such as "Do good for X" (Sadek 1987: 239 - 241), or to request the standard benefits of life, prosperity, and health (Davies 2007).

Rituals were probably carried out by the makers and dedicators of votive objects (Pinch 1993: 339 - 342). An abbreviated version of the "Opening of the Mouth" ritual is likely to have been performed to animate even miniature images of deities. Other offerings may have had spells said over them to identify them with the things or beings they represented. It may have been a requirement for objects to be purified or blessed by priests before they could be offered to a deity.

Most votive material has been recovered from pits or dumps, so comparatively little is known about where and how votive objects were originally displayed. In state temples, votive stelae were usually set up in open forecourts or just outside the enclosure walls, but in community shrines they might be placed in the sanctuary itself (Pinch 1993:

338). It is likely that most small offerings were, at some point, formally presented to a divine image by priests. Collections of offerings have been found in bowls or baskets, and some votive figurines and statuettes were wrapped up in linen (e.g., Davies 2007: figs. 76 - 77; Smith 1974: pl. IVd). Many small votive objects are pierced for suspension and may originally have been hung on cords.

It appears to have been considered sacrilegious to recycle or destroy votive objects. Sometimes old offerings were carefully deposited in the foundations of rebuilt shrines, perhaps as a means of sanctifying the new construction (Davies 2007; Eigner 2003; Smith 1974: 55 - 56). Votive objects were also buried in pits within temple precincts, along with archaic temple furnishings (Kemp 2006: 121 - 123). The respect generally shown for old gifts to the gods shows that they were a significant part of Egyptian religious practice: they apparently embodied the hope that deities would take beneficent action on the donors' behalf.

Bibliographic Notes

For general discussions of practices related to temple visits, see Yoyotte (1960) and Baines (1991, 2001). Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom votive offerings are described and interpreted by Kemp (2006: 111 - 131). Gebel Zeit is a key site for the study of votive practices of the Middle Kingdom and the Second Intermediate Period (Castel et al. 1984-). New Kingdom votive offerings and the role of votive practices within popular religion are examined by Pinch (1993). Sadek's book on New Kingdom popular religion includes sections on graffiti and ear stelae in sacred areas (Sadek 1987: 48 - 53, 245 - 267), topics further addressed in the monographs of Jacquet-Gordon (2003) and Morgan (2004). Deposits of votive bronzes of the first millennium BCE are published by Green (1987) and discussed in Smith (1974: 18 - 19, 49 - 57), Davies (2007) and Wuttmann, Coulon, and Gombert (2007). For examples of votive terracottas of the Ptolemaic Period see Myśliwiec (2000: 202 - 207). Roman Period terracotta figurines, once considered to be votives, are now regarded as components of domestic religion (Dunand 1990: 14).

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